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ABSTRACT

The debate over school choice has been dominated by research findings that emphasize the impacts of school choice on standardized test results. This study of the attitudes of parents in Cleveland (Ohio) and Milwaukee (Wisconsin) indicates that test results are not what interest parents most when they are facing school choice. Parents are interested in what is being taught and who is teaching it, and they seldom mention results of achievement tests. Interviews with 270 parents, teachers, and school administrators in these 2 cities showed that information about the school's program, primarily the curriculum and method of instruction, is the most common piece of information parents want in making a decision about where to send their children. Information on teachers is the next most common thing parents mentioned. Other criteria parents mention, in order after school program and teachers, are: (1) school characteristics, such as class size and make-up of student body; (2) general school outcomes, such as development of lifetime skills and advancement to the next grade; (3) safety and discipline; (4) standardized test scores; (5) level of parent involvement; and (6) school reputation. Teachers and administrators also reported that what parents ask about most is the school's program. This agreement among parents is found for both public and private schools. (Contains eight tables.) (SLD)

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Public Policy Forum
Researching Community Issues

Public Policy Forum Report

School Choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee: What Parents Look For

November, 1997

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Public Policy Forum

Researching Community Issues

School Choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee: What Parents Look For

The Public Policy Forum

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Jeffrey C. Browne, Research Director
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November, 1997

Funded by:
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School choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee: What Parents Look For

Summary

The debate over school choice has been dominated by research findings that focus on comparing the impacts of school choice on standardized test results for students in private choice schools and their counterparts in the public schools.[1] This emphasis on test data seems to suggest that there is only one way in which a private school that receives public money could satisfy the accountability needs of the public: by proving that its pupils can outscore their public school counterparts on tests. Our research has found that the test-score competition has a limited value for the parents we interviewed in Cleveland and Milwaukee who are making decisions about where to send their children to school. These parents are interested in what is being taught and who is teaching it and rarely mention the results on achievement tests.

In interviews with 270 parents, teachers and school administrators we asked a number of questions about what parents look for in a school in order to make a decision about where to send their children. Listed below are some of the major findings:

- Information on the school's program, primarily its curriculum and method of instruction, is the most common piece of information parents want in making a decision about where to send their children (See Table 2).
- Information on teachers is the next most common response by parents (See Table 2).
- The other criteria that parents mention, in order of frequency after school program and teachers, are school characteristics, such as class size and make-up of student body; general student outcomes, such as development of lifetime skills and advancement to the next grade level; safety and discipline at the school; standardized test scores; level of parent involvement and the school's reputation (See Table 2).
- Teachers and school administrators concur with parents in reporting most frequently that information about a school's program is what parents want to know in choosing a school for their children (See Table 2).
- There is essential agreement among parents, across both public and private schools, on the criteria that are important to them in selecting a school.

Introduction

At the time of this study, school choice programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee are the only two choice programs in the country that provide public money in the form of vouchers and scholarships to low-income parents to send their children to private schools.[2] The Public Policy Forum, under the direction of a panel of eight education scholars, has spent the last ten months examining these two school choice programs by focusing on the issue of accountability.[3] This study, funded by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago, is being conducted in two phases. The first phase involved conducting interviews with parents, teachers and administrators at public schools and private choice schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee. We refer to these individuals as

stakeholders. The second phase focuses on a telephone survey that is being conducted with a randomly generated group of 800 adults in Ohio and Wisconsin.

The issue of school choice accountability is complex. There are many divergent views on school choice and on how schools that accept public money can be held accountable. We believe that by combining stakeholder interviews with reliable survey research we can elicit a set of findings that are not only valid, but also widely accepted by the divergent groups interested in the school choice issue.

This report examines some of the findings from our first phase of research. The material presented in this report focuses on the views of parents, teachers and administrators on one aspect of accountability: what parents look for in a school. The findings presented in this report are one small piece of the accountability puzzle. However, this piece is important to share because it provides an understanding of what parents identify as information they need when they are choosing a school.

The final report, combining the data we have gathered in our stakeholder interviews with our survey data, will be in the form of recommendations for accountability guidelines directed to policymakers in Ohio and Wisconsin. Our final report will focus on finding a consensus on the topic of accountability from the perspective of all of the individuals interested in this issue. We hypothesize that the information needs of taxpayers and elected officials for holding choice schools accountable may coincide in many respects with those expressed by parents when choosing a school for their own child. In our final report it is our goal to identify a consensus, that meets the individual needs of parents and the collective needs of taxpayers, on the complex issue of accountability.

Methodology and Data Collection

This research is conducted using an inductive approach. The researchers did not create a list of accountability guidelines and test the feasibility of these guidelines. Instead the academic panel that directed this project created a research design that focused first on the concerns of stakeholders and asked them what it is they look for in a school, how they want to obtain this information and who should be responsible for ensuring that schools provide this information. The results are enlightening because not only have we found strong internal consensus among stakeholders across both public and private schools in what they look for in a school, we have learned that any single-factor evaluation of school choice programs is bound to produce findings that fall short in satisfying the needs of stakeholders we interviewed in holding schools accountable.

This report discusses the findings from the first phase of research. In this phase we analyze the responses of interviews with 270 stakeholders (See Table 1).[4] Each person interviewed is affiliated either as a parent, teacher or administrator with a public or private choice school in Cleveland and Milwaukee.[5] The majority of our interviews were conducted with people affiliated with primary school education. However, we did conduct interviews with individuals

affiliated with three high schools. We have fewer high schools due to the fact that choice, as it has developed in Cleveland and Milwaukee, has largely focused on elementary-school-aged children. The goal in choosing our purposeful sample of schools is to represent the typical public and private choice school in the two cities.[6] While we believe the findings have merit beyond the cities of Cleveland and Milwaukee, it would be inappropriate not to stress the possibility that the views we are sharing are unique to Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Table 1. Number of Interviews by Stakeholder Group.

	All	Private Choice School	Public School
Parent	153	74	79
School Administrator	25	14	11
Teacher	92	44	48
Total	270	132	138

We asked a total of 15 questions in our interviews and report the responses to the most general and all-encompassing question: *Assuming you could have all the information you wanted about a school, what would you want to know about schools in order to make a decision about where to send your own child?* This question was rephrased for teachers and administrators who were asked their perception of what parents want to know about a school when making this decision. This question is open ended, and we did not prompt the interviewees for responses. The benefit in using this format is that the interviewees were given free rein in their responses. In this way there was no preconceived notion of what should be important to the stakeholders. One of the potential drawbacks is that it requires more effort on the part of the analysts to group these responses into consistent categories. To ensure accuracy, we sent samples of our interviews to the panel overseeing this project. They were asked to code the responses. In this way the final categories are the result of the analysis of nine researchers.[7]

The tables we present in the following report give the constructed categories and the percentage of respondents by stakeholder group who included the particular category in their responses.[8] It is important to note that we did not ask the interviewees to rank the importance of the responses they gave; nor did we limit the number of categories they could mention.[9] In addition, we highlight the essential agreement within stakeholder groups, across both public and private schools, on the criteria that are important. Where evident, we will point out significant differences across these public/private stakeholders.

What is Taught at School

We found that parents at both public and private schools overwhelmingly want to know what is being taught at the school and the method of teaching. In Table 2 this criteria is identified as school program. This does not mean that parents are asking questions as precise as what textbook is used in a particular class. Parents have a general interest in what is being taught and how, but they rarely ask about such specific details as lesson plans.

Table 2. Criteria Recommended by Stakeholder Groups in Cleveland and Milwaukee

	PARENTS (N=153)	TEACHERS (N=92)	SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS (N=25)
School Program	59%	67%	60%
Teachers	45%	45%	24%
Outcomes General	35%	39%	60%
Outcomes Test Scores	15%	12%	40%
School Characteristics	31%	30%	44%
Safety and Discipline	28%	35%	28%
Reputation of School	9%	20%	28%
Parent Involvement	12%	18%	8%

Note: The total percentage exceeds 100%, 235% for parents, 266% for teachers and 292% for administrators, because respondents on average mentioned between two and three criteria. Administrators have the highest total percentage because they gave the most criteria in their answers to this open-ended question.

Interestingly, parents disagree about what subject matter is important in the curriculum. The range of interests in what is being taught in schools is almost unlimited. Some note the desire to have a curriculum that is challenging and focused on gifted and talented students. Others agreed with the following parent who states, "I want to know if the program offered at this school *(the school her child attends)* is comparable to the same grades across the country." Still others indicate specific interest in particular subjects, methods or in the focus of the school.

We found a strong interest in foreign languages, ranging from the offering of single courses to language immersion to bilingual education. Some parents want the basics stressed, while others are concerned with the technological program at a school and are concerned with how much time their children will spend on the computer. One parent expressed her interest in the computer this way, "I want to make sure that the computer isn't teaching my child. The computer is important, but at school I want my child to get a good grounding in the basics." Some parents indicate that their children have learning disabilities, and they are very interested in knowing the school programs that are available to their children.

Administrators at both public and private schools note that they believe parents are extremely interested in the curriculum and how it is taught, but they also state how few requests they get for this information. As one administrator commented, "I am waiting for someone to ask, 'What are you teaching in fourth grade math?' And in the 30 years I have been here, no one has." Her feeling is that parents are asking this information of others because she knows they are finding it.

Teachers believe that parents desire to know the method of teaching used by a school. As they state, some parents are interested in traditional methods and look for this in a school. Others want to know whether a school uses Montesorri or the Waldorf Model of teaching. Teachers, however, are also likely to mention that parents should be interested in the specific details about what is taught in a school. They mention the need to look at lesson plans, book lists and the goals that are set for student learning. We found that very few parents want this level of detailed

information on what is taught. Nonetheless, parents, teachers and administrators at both public and private schools are in agreement on the importance of having some fundamental information on what is being taught at a school.

Information on Teachers

For parents, information on teachers is also important. Parents do not underestimate the impact that teachers have on their children's education. For them this includes both the academic impact and the impact teachers have on a child's overall emotional well-being.

"*Caring, committed and qualified teachers wanted here.*" This would be the kind of statement that would appear in an ad placed by parents if they were choosing the teachers for their children. These three attributes are inter-connected and, for parents, having one without the others would be unsatisfactory. As one parent states, "When your child spends so much time at school you should know who they are spending it with." The teachers are both educators and role models and the common questions parents want answered fit within this theme.

If parents were conducting the teacher interviews, the following would be some of the questions they would be interested in asking: How do the teachers treat the children? Do they establish a mutual respect between themselves and the students? What are the characteristics of the teachers? How do they control a classroom? What are the teachers' values? Do they have children? Are they easy to talk to? Do they treat the children fairly? Spanish speaking parents often ask if the teachers are bilingual.

Parents talk about watching their children's teachers interact with the students and finding out from their children if they are having a good experience with their teacher. The effect that teachers have on students is clearly on the minds of parents when they make their decisions about where to send their children.

Parents are also interested in the educational and work qualifications of the teachers. Many ask if they are qualified to teach the subject they are teaching. However, it is important to point out that having strong educational qualifications cannot make up for a poor commitment or a lack of caring.

Another factor that surfaced for parents in public schools was the issue of recycling teachers. They refer to a system they describe as one in which a teacher is removed from one school because of an inability to teach and sent to another school. As one parent declares, "My child's teacher is recycled. He couldn't teach where he was so they sent him to my child's school. This shouldn't happen."

Table 3 illustrates the percentages of stakeholders in private choice schools and public schools who selected the category information on teachers. Over 50 percent of private choice school teachers and 40 percent of public school teachers we interviewed believe that parents want information about who is teaching their children. However, teachers more commonly mention

the need for parents to know if the teachers are certified and prepared more than knowing if they are committed and caring. Teachers know attributes, such as level of commitment and how much they care, are important but are less likely to believe that these should be the most important variables parents use in choosing a school.

Table 3. Information on Teachers: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice School Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public School Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	39%	51%
Teacher	50%	40%
School Administrator	36%	9%

Private school administrators are more likely to mention the importance parents place on having information about the teachers than are public school administrators. Public school administrators indicate that, while they receive complaints about teachers from parents, the parents need to know that the principal is not responsible for hiring or firing teachers. Much of this decision making is left to the central administrative office.

Outcomes

When the general public looks at kindergarten through 12th grade education it does so with a focus on outcomes. We most commonly hear about achievement test scores, third grade reading scores and graduation rates. For this reason, it is not surprising that when it comes to evaluating school choice in Cleveland and in Milwaukee we find the focus is mostly on student achievement as measured by standardized test scores. We might think then that average test scores would be a strong factor for parents when it comes to making decisions about where to send their children. Our research does not support this. As Table 1 illustrates, 35 percent of parents indicate wanting information on general outcomes in comparison to 59 percent of parents who mention they want information on what is being taught. These outcome measures include everything from developing lifetime skills to being ready to advance to the next grade. Even more surprising is that only 15 percent of parents indicate wanting information on such outcome measures as standardized test results.

What does this mean? The interview data indicate that parents are concerned about the educational experience of their children. They believe it is important to know how their children are progressing, but are less concerned about broad measures of school achievement. Parents appear quite sophisticated when it comes to understanding their children's achievement. They know that average scores across a school are affected by a number of variables. They mention the poverty of the student body, whether English is the first language of the students and how learning and emotional disabilities are affecting the scores. In the interviews we conducted, we found that a parent who likes what is being taught and feels that the teachers are caring,

committed and qualified will often dismiss or defend the average test scores of the school his or her child attends. On the other hand, if a parent is unhappy with the teachers and the curriculum, the parent will often blame the teachers for the low achievement scores of their school.

When parents do mention academic outcomes they always focus on the progress of their children. They want to know if their children will be ready to go on to the next grade levels. They will ask about the lifetime skills their children are developing. Many parents want to know that their children will be prepared for the world of work. One parent expressed her view this way, "I want to know that job skills are emphasized as early as sixth grade." In addition, parents of both private and public school children are interested in where the graduates end up. They would like to know how many children end up in the high school of their choice or what college they attend. Parents often focus on what kinds of children achieve in the school? One parent put it this way, "I am looking for a school that encourages black, young males to go on to college."

As Table 4 illustrates, teachers believe information on general outcomes is important but seem to understand the lower level of importance parents place on test scores as a measure of achievement. Teachers are likely to note that parents want to ensure that the teachers will be there for their children and will work with them through any academic difficulty. Administrators at both public and private schools believe that general outcomes and test scores are important factors for parents when making a decision about where to send their children.

Table 4. Information on Outcomes: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

General Outcomes (Not including test scores)	Private Choice Schools Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public Schools Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	30%	39%
Teacher	39%	40%
School Administrator	57%	64%

Test Scores	Private Choice Schools	Public Schools
Parent	12%	18%
Teacher	14%	10%
School Administrator	29%	55%

School Characteristics

Parents, administrators and teachers indicate that the characteristics of a school are important to parents when making a decision about where to send their children. The characteristics of a school include such tangible factors as the number of students, class size, make-up of the student body and cleanliness of the building. They also include such intangible factors as the atmosphere of the building and a racist culture they may perceive in the school.

Over 40 percent of the administrators at public and private schools believe parents are interested in information on the characteristics of the school (See Table 5). Administrators indicate that no school can fit the needs of every child. Several administrators stressed that while parents often look at the general characteristics of a school, such as class size, administrators want the parents to really look at how children will fit in a particular school. One administrator commented, "Parents need to understand that even siblings may have different needs and it may be better for the children to have them placed in different schools."

Table 5. School Characteristics: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice Schools Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public Schools Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	30%	33%
Teacher	23%	38%
School Administrator	43%	45%

It is simple enough for parents to obtain information on class size and the total enrollment for a school. Quantifying the important factor of atmosphere or culture of a school is not as easy. Educators and a number of parents indicated that the only way to judge the atmosphere of a school is to visit the school. Parents who walk down the halls and spend time in the classroom are going to have a much better picture of and feeling for the school.

The picture they are looking for will differ depending on the parent. One teacher described it this way: "They (parents) should be looking for a school where children's artwork and literature are posted on the walls; when they walk in they see smiling faces, the classroom is in control and yet not too controlled to inhibit active learning. The teacher would be in tune with the children's needs and be flexible and have a principal that interacts with the school and knows the children." A parent commented that, "The environment of the school is important. I had my kids enrolled in another school and thought it was uppity and the kids were shallow. That didn't work for my children." Still another parent said, "I am Native American and it is very important that the school my child attends has an environment that promotes individual responsibility and growth. I don't want any hand holding. It has taken me a long time to find a school that fits with what I believe." At the high school level one parent remarked that she did not want the kids to be walking around like zombies.

Many parents also express concern about any racism that their children may encounter in a school. This is another difficult factor to quantify. A number of parents stress how they visit a school and try to get a feel for the culture of the school to judge if any racism exists. One parent declared, "I want to ensure that my children will never encounter any racism. If they do, I will pull them out of the school immediately." This parent's comment reflects the depth of concern over racist attitudes and actions that parents want to shield from their children.

Parents also indicate that they want to know the make-up of the student body. Questions range from wanting to know if their children's friends attend the school to wanting to know the racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds of the children who attend the school. Administrators are more likely than other stakeholders to mention the importance of the student body make-up. One administrator commented that, "No parent will tell you I won't send my child to a particular school because of the economic background of the students or the race of the students. However, this is simply the case for many parents." For the most part, these administrators believe parents are more comfortable sending their children to a school where they believe their children will fit in. Another administrator said, "We have done a very poor job of integrating our families; it should come as no surprise that we have a hard time integrating our schools."

Safety and Discipline

The perception of crime has become a major factor in public policy debates over tougher penalties for criminals and the explosive growth in prison building. Nowhere is the perception of crime greater than in our large urban areas. For this reason, it is not surprising that parents, teachers and administrators in Cleveland and Milwaukee believe that issues of safety and discipline are important when parents make a decision about where to send their children to school. Safety and discipline issues are mentioned by approximately 30 percent of all stakeholders (See Table 6). However, this is one category where there appears to be a significant difference between parents, teachers and administrators at public and private choice schools. Over 35 percent of the parents at public schools mention the issue of safety and discipline, compared to 20 percent of the private school parents.

Table 6. Safety and Discipline: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice Schools Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public Schools Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	20%	35%
Teacher	23%	46%
School Administrator	21%	36%

Our interview data indicate that teachers at public schools are asked more often about the discipline policies and safety at the schools than private school teachers. This is particularly the case at public high schools. The administrators at the high school level believe that the perception of safety is a major concern of parents. These high school administrators believe that issues of safety often take precedence over curriculum and academic achievement. One high school administrator remarked, "While you may think parents would be asking about curriculum, the building, location, extra curricular activities, the main thing on the minds of parents of this school: 'Is the school safe?'" An administrator at another public high school believes that the issue is one of perception of crime more than a reality of crime. He commented, "I believe that the news media portray schools as unsafe. I don't believe this. Most of the problems with

violence are outside of the school. At times this might be brought into the school. For example, a kid might bring a weapon into school because he is scared about something that happened outside of school. I know these incidents are rare, but the media makes such a big deal of them they get completely blown out of proportion."

The interview data also indicate that teachers at public schools are more likely than private school teachers to mention dealing with issues that affect the perception of safety in a school. No teachers at private schools mention that some of their students ran with gangs, or that they have adjudicated kids in their classrooms. At the public schools many teachers discussed these issues. A public school teacher commented, "Less than one-half of one percent of our students are involved with these activities. But the fact that we have kids recently released from Wales (a juvenile detention facility in Wisconsin) and students on parole is a factor we live with every school day. This small percentage of students tends to affect the atmosphere of safety at the school."

Beyond the safety issue, parents are concerned with the level of discipline at a school. Some parents expressed concern that the school policy on discipline was too lax. They felt students were allowed too much freedom and lacked control. One administrator at a private elementary school stated, "We had a loose discipline policy in the past and we ended up looking foolish. This year we sent a discipline code book home with parents and they were required to sign the form indicating they know what our policies are. This year we have seen a drop in discipline problems, and we attribute this to the understanding our parents have on how we expect the students to behave." Several parents indicate that they are interested in how discipline is carried out at a school. One parent declared, "The amount of hollering that goes on in this school is ridiculous."

The stakeholders we interviewed believe parents want to know that the schools their children attend are orderly, calm and safe. Many believe that there is no excuse for disorder or unsafe conditions. Our interview data indicate that parents who do not like what they see or hear about a school will readily voice their level of concern. In choosing a school, the issues of discipline and safety are important, but are mentioned by fewer stakeholders than those wanting information on teachers and the school program. Perhaps, as one stakeholder commented, when parents have a good relationship with teachers and believe the school program best meets the needs of their children, they are more confident that discipline problems will be less of an issue. More research would be needed to uncover the unique relationship between these criteria.

Reputation of School

There is a common belief that the reputation of a school goes a long way toward attracting parents to a school. We categorize a response as *Reputation* when a parent, teacher or administrator indicated that the perceptions of other people are important when parents make decisions about schools. Reputation also includes the responses: "*The school must have a good reputation in the community;*" *or* "*The school is perceived to be one of the best.*" In this research, the category reputation refers to how the school is generally regarded.

Our results indicate that few parents mention reputation as being an important variable in making decisions about where to send their children. Several administrators, on the other hand, believe that maintaining a positive reputation is critical for a school's success. As Table 7 illustrates, over 25 percent of the administrators mention this factor compared to less than nine percent of the parents who mention this factor. In addition, we find little difference between private and public stakeholder attitudes toward the importance of this variable.

Table 7. Reputation of the School: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice Schools Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public Schools Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	9%	9%
Teacher	23%	17%
School Administrator	29%	27%

Of those who do mention reputation as being important, one private school administrator said confidently, "Parents choose a school based on the recommendations of other parents. Parents know a school is a good place to send their kids because 'so and so' said it was a good place." Another private school administrator remarked, "We did our own survey of parents to find out what parents were looking for and they indicated that the reputation of the school was important." The principal went on to mention that the staff works very hard to maintain their good reputation. One more private school administrator asserted, "You can't underestimate the power of word-of-mouth advertising of a school. We know that negative stories spread more quickly than positive ones, so we work to resolve any problems quickly before they can damage our reputation." These administrators at private schools believe maintaining the reputation of a school is important in ensuring that the school has a long waiting list of students wanting to get in.

Several administrators at public schools mention that reputation is important, but did not place a strong emphasis on reputation. One public elementary school administrator asserted, "We compete for students with all private, public and 220 schools[10] in the area. We are now going door to door to let parents know that we want them to come and check out our school and to gain a reputation for being a good school in this neighborhood."

Some teachers indicate that reputation is an important factor for parents, but teachers are more likely to view this method of decision-making in a negative light. One teacher commented, "When a parent relies on the perception of someone else they are able to get the perspective of a single person. That person may have had a bad experience, but that experience may not represent the majority of parents."

Parents are reserved about saying reputation is a major factor in their decision making. Some administrators suggest that this is because parents do not want to say they did not actually visit a school or talk with the teachers before sending their children to the school. "Parents don't want to say they heard from someone else that a school is good without investigating it themselves." Most administrators believe that we should not underestimate the power of a school's reputation in a parent's decision.

Parent Involvement

One of the ideas behind school reform across the country is that public schools are lacking in parent involvement and that some schools actually discourage parent involvement by having a closed-door policy. Our data, as illustrated in Table 8, do not indicate that parent involvement is a major factor when parents are choosing a school for their children. However, 30 percent of private school teachers believe this is an important factor. This is much higher than for any of the other public or private school stakeholders.

Table 8. Parent Involvement: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Stakeholders in Cleveland and Milwaukee.

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice School Parent (n=74) Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public School Parent (n=79) Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Parent	12%	13%
Teacher	30%	8%
School Administrator	7%	9%

Only 19 of the parents we interviewed indicate that they looked at how involved parents are with a school when choosing a school. Even fewer parents indicate that they looked for a school that had an open-door policy. Parents who did indicate this was important stated such things as, "I feel very welcome all the time in my child's school. This is very important to me." Another parent stated it this way, "I want to know how involved parents are with a school because parent involvement makes all the difference. I make the teacher at my child's school nervous because I come to the school too much. Sometimes she asks my daughter, 'Is your mother coming in again today?' I want to be involved and know other parents are too."

Teachers and administrators also indicate that they do not feel that parents look for parent involvement at schools when they are choosing schools. One administrator commented, "I don't see very many parents interested in getting involved at our high school. They may come to extracurricular school activities, plays or sporting events but don't get involved with many in-school activities or planning." Another administrator stated that parents tend to become less involved with their children's education as their children get older. He believes that this is really the opposite of what should happen. He believes parents should be even more involved with the school as their children enter high school. He remarked, "We tend to parent in reverse--a lot of attention when they are young and little attention when they are older."

A public school teacher expressed this opinion, "We don't have much parent participation here at this (high school). We say we want parent involvement, but only some kinds of involvement. We are not so excited when it comes to decisions about curriculum, hiring, firing etc. We are very wary of people with their own personal ax to grind. Education is the only area in which everyone feels they are qualified as experts, and this can be truly annoying."

What else are parents looking for?

There are a number of variables that are mentioned by less than three percent of the parents, teachers and administrators we interviewed. They include information on the school's facilities, the location, the availability of transportation, the availability of before-and-after-school child care, the time the school starts, the costs for attending the school, the religious values of the school and the admissions policies of the school.

Some may find it surprising that the educators and parents we interviewed appeared to lack interest in the facilities or resources of a particular school. It was rare that parents mention wanting to know whether schools have a computer lab, library, gym or auditorium. These variables may be important, but they certainly did not come to the minds of people we interviewed.

It may be even more surprising that the stakeholders we interviewed rarely mention the costs of attending a school. The reason for this may be that most of the parents we interviewed were not paying full tuition for their schools. Half of the stakeholders we interviewed were affiliated with public schools. In addition many of the private school parents interviewed were accepting vouchers and/or scholarships to attend private choice schools.

Some administrators believe that few parents will be up front about some of what they look for in a school. A public school administrator commented that, "Many parents like our school because it starts early and it fits their work schedule, but I doubt if any parent will admit that this is what they look for in a school." This may play a role in the small number of people who indicate that these types of variables are important. However, it may also be that such factors as location, time the school starts, whether before-and-after-school child care is offered and facilities play a much smaller role in the minds of parents than knowledge about teachers and what is being taught.

Discussion

We asked parents, teachers and administrators in Cleveland and Milwaukee a series of open-ended questions. In this report we share our findings from the analysis of an unprompted, open-ended question that asked these stakeholders what they believe parents look for in a school. What we learned from interviewing these 270 stakeholders is quite intriguing. We have learned that parents want to know what is being taught and who is teaching it. To a lesser degree parents want to know about school characteristics, safety and discipline, parental involvement and test

scores. However, their interest in these factors pales in comparison to their great interest in school program and teachers. In addition, stakeholders from both the public and private choice schools generally agree on what is important in a school.

What are the implications of these findings? First, parents look at schools from an individualistic perspective. They ask if a school's program meets the needs of their children. They want to know if the teachers will be able to teach and nurture their children. They want to know if their children will succeed in a particular school. Second, if a parent believes a school meets his or her child's needs the parent is likely to support that school and have a positive attitude toward the school. Third, studies that solely evaluate school choice from the perspective of standardized test scores are not providing these stakeholders with the kind of accountability that they demand from a school. An unintended consequence of such narrowly focused evaluations may be that we miss the opportunity for showcasing what is highly valued by parents in a school.

How do we connect this individual measure of accountability with the collective needs of taxpayers and elected officials for holding private choice schools accountable? Our next phase of research focuses on providing an answer to this question. We believe that by combining the knowledge we have gained through this first phase of research with our survey analysis, we will have a rich source of data for developing the needed consensus. We recognize that in order to develop broadly accepted accountability guidelines we must establish a connection between what these stakeholders want and what taxpayers and elected officials expect. Our final report will examine ways for reaching this consensus.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson and Jiangtau Du. 1997. "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment," Program in Education Policy and Governance, Center for American Political Studies, Harvard University. Celia Elena Rouse, 1996. "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program." Working Paper #371, Princeton University Industrial Relations Section.

[2] The two programs differ in terms of qualifications and types of schools that may participate. The most important difference is that participants in Cleveland may attend both secular and non-secular schools.

[3] The panel was chaired by Dr. Mary P. Hoy, Dean of the School of Education at Marquette University, and Dr. William Harvey, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Members of the panel included: Dr. Michele Foster, Claremont Graduate School; Dr. Paul T. Hill, University of Washington; Dr. Mary Huba, Iowa State University; Dr. William Morgan, Cleveland State University; Dr. S.E. Phillips, Michigan State University; and Dr. Amy Stuart Wells, University of California, Los Angeles.

[4] These interviews were conducted by a team of interviewers from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) and Cleveland State University (CSU). The UWM interviewers were Jackie Champagne, Audra Grant, Jolene Jesse, Ann Lorman, Dayna Velasco and Emily Van Dunk. The team at CSU was directed by Ann Thornton with the assistance of Tyree Ayers, Ronnie Dunn, Margaret Gerba and Tobey Manns.

[5] Cleveland Public Schools (CPS) serves approximately 70,000 students. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) serves approximately 103,000 students. These school districts have many factors in common. Both serve large urban areas with high levels of children who live in poverty. More than 40 percent of the children in Cleveland live in poverty, and 38 percent of the children in Milwaukee live in poverty (1990 Census). Of those children that attend MPS, approximately 66 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In both school districts, approximately 60 percent of the student body is African American, 5 percent Asian, and 12 percent Hispanic.

[6] We chose five public schools and five private choice schools in each city based on a purposeful sample design. The majority of our interviews came from stakeholders affiliated with one of these 20 schools. These schools are representative of the racial, economic and geographic diversity of the two cities. Please contact the author for further information on how the schools were selected.

The public schools in Milwaukee are: 53rd St. Elementary, Curtin Elementary, Juneau High School, Maryland Avenue Elementary and Parkview Elementary. The five private choice schools in Milwaukee are: Bruce Guadalupe Harambee, Learning Enterprise Institute of Wisconsin, Urban Day and Woodlands Elementary. The five Cleveland public schools are: Anton Grdina Elementary, Central Middle School, Newton D. Baker, South High School and Tremont Elementary. The Cleveland private choice schools are: Hope Central Academy, Hope Ohio City Academy, Mt. Pleasant Elementary, Saint Adalbert, and Saint Thomas/Saint Phillip. We contacted the administrators and five teachers affiliated with each of these schools. We also targeted ten parent interviews from each school. In order to ensure a broader sample of parents, we also interviewed parents at a school expo in Milwaukee. In addition, we interviewed a randomly selected group of parents from those that applied to the Cleveland Scholarship Program.

Our interviewers were students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Cleveland State University. They were chosen based on their previous interviewing experience and understanding of social science research methods. The interviewers went through a training session conducted by the staff of the Public Policy Forum. In addition, the interviewers were provided with information on the school choice program in the respective cities. The interviews were not tape recorded. The interviewer was required to write down the responses made by the interviewee and then entered the responses into a password encoded database located on the internet. This method of data entry insured almost immediate access to the interview data. For further information on the interviews and/or access to the interview data, please contact the author.

[7] Sample copies of the interviews were sent to our academic panel. These individuals went through and categorized the data which basically calls for grouping the hundreds of responses into a manageable number of categories that captures all of the variations in the responses. The categories that were developed by the panel served as a guide for the final coding. Any errors are the sole responsibility of the primary researcher, Emily Van Dunk.

[8] In this analysis we did not find any significant differences in responses from interviewees in Milwaukee and Cleveland. In the final questions, where we ask about who should be responsible for making information available and ensuring that it is accurate, we find some slight differences in opinion between the two cities. This will be explored in the final report.

[9] The categorization of this data involved taking hundreds of responses and breaking each down into what can be termed databits. These databits are the phrases or words within the response that can be grouped together into categories. Two levels of categorization took place. First, each response was broken into phrases and words. The next step involved taking these phrases and grouping them into the final categories that we labeled school program, school characteristics, teachers, general outcomes, test score outcomes, safety/discipline, parent involvement, reputation and school characteristics. In order to clarify this process we include the following example.

A public school parent responded to this question in the following manner: "*Two of my children are special needs kids and it is important to me that I find a program that works for my kids. I believe each child is different and that no one school will work for every child. One of my children needed traditional schools and the other did not. The method of teaching is important to me and it is important to understand if your child will fit into that program. I am very interested in the style of teaching because each child learns differently.*"

From this response we take out the following databits: 1. focus of the school i.e., traditional; 2. meeting individual needs of children; 3. method of teaching; It is important to sift through the response sorting through some repetition. These three databits were sorted into the following categories: focus of school i.e., traditional, School Program; method of teaching, School Program; meeting individual needs, Outcomes General. The final coding for this parent would include the factors School Program and Outcomes General. While the parent mentioned two School Program databits, we are looking at the percentage of respondents who mentioned a particular category, not the number of responses for each category. We believe that in this way we are not over-weighting particular categories.

The final categories include the following databits: School Program: method of teaching, course offerings, bilingual offerings, multicultural curriculum, challenging curriculum, foreign language offerings, hands-on-learning, innovative teaching, job preparation courses, mission and philosophy of school, focus of the school, advanced course offerings, special needs course offerings, expectations of school program, field trip offerings, honors program offerings. Teachers: character of teachers, educational degrees of teachers, gender of teachers, how the teachers treat the children, qualifications and experience of teachers, race/ethnicity of teachers, retention rate of teachers, accountability of teachers for student learning, teacher's moral values, ability of the teacher to motivate students, the certification of teachers, and the staff development opportunities for teachers. Outcomes General: development of cognitive skills, development of creative skills, development of lifetime skills, grade point average, graduation rate from high school, amount of homework, meeting individual needs of child, grade advancement, study habits school encourages, the grading process, where alumni end up, Is my child learning? Do my kids like it? Outcomes Test Scores: Standardized test scores. School Characteristics: Atmosphere of the school, attendance rate, attrition rate of students, classroom size, make-up of student body, history of school, cultural diversity of school, number of students, student teacher ratio, ratio of teachers to assistants. Safety and Discipline: amount of violence in schools, appearance of outside community, code of discipline, security procedures in place at school, level of disciplinary actions. Reputation of School: recommendations of teachers and other parents, reputation of the school, does the school rank as one of the best? Parent Involvement: Ability to go in and talk with teacher, open communication between parent and teacher, how involved parents are with the school, parental satisfaction, requirements for parental involvement, if training is offered for parents, can parents work with school to improve it, what committees are run by parents?

[10] 220 schools are public schools in the Milwaukee area that participate in Chapter 220 which was created in 1976 to promote racial integration in Milwaukee area schools.

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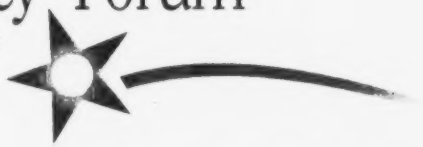

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